

THE METEORIC ADVENTURES OF COME-ON CHARLEY

By
Thomas Addison

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"SAY, wait a minute, Come-On. Look here!"

Mr. Percival Teeters came to a sudden stop, like a lean pointer to the scent. He gazed at a dazzling array of spring neckwear in a haberdasher's shop.

A young man who, two corners below, had fallen in behind the pair also stopped; he edged up to them as they stood looking in at the show window.

"The 'Soul Kiss Scarf.' Pretty scrumptious, hey?" Mr. Teeters commented.

"Kind of noisy," said Mr. Carter. "Scare the horses. Ought to have a cut-off."

The young man standing near laughed in open good-fellowship.

"Make a brace band sound like a lullaby," he remarked.

They turned and inspected him. He wore an Argentine frock, braided, with a double pink in the buttonhole, and a semi-conical silk hat that smote Mr. Teeters as the last extreme of elegance.

A cast in one eye, the right, gave him a humorous expression which invited confidence.

Mr. Teeters started into the shop, and Charley followed. So did the stranger.

"Those silk handkerchiefs stab me to the heart," he said with the easy laugh. "I'll tear off a dozen of 'em. Don't want to leave all my money to the old folks. They've got a plenty."

Now parenthetically let it be recorded that Mr. Teeters' impelling motive in acquiring for his wardrobe "Soul Kiss Scarf" lay in the ravishing fact that he was to be of the party on the cruise of Mr. George Francis Grant's palatial steam yacht "Surprise" in a few days.

Dorothy Grant had only that afternoon extended the invitation. One of her guests had failed her, owing to circumstances beyond his control, and she immediately telephoned Mr. Teeters.

Mr. Teeters, since receiving his invitation, had floated in a whirl of excitement. So he bought a "Soul Kiss" and, in emulation of the pleasing stranger in the Argentine frock, he laid in a supply of the flamboyant silk handkerchiefs which had cried attention from the window.

The young man helped him choose the colors. He was very friendly and frankly communicative. Out home everybody always spoke to everybody else, and that must be his apology for speaking to them. He hoped they would take it in good part.

"Sure," said Charley. "Glad to meet you. My name is Carter." He held out his hand.

"Crisp, Clarence Crisp, is my name," made known the other.

He shook Charley's hand, and reached for Mr. Teeters' inquiringly.

"I answer to Percival Teeters when they blow the dinner horn," said that gentleman facetiously.

"No! You don't say!" exclaimed Mr. Crisp. He drew back a step and glanced his admiration.

Mr. Crisp fairly effervesced with pleasure. His squint eye did tricks that made him more humorously attractive than ever.

"Well, this is what I call luck!" he declared. "The papers back home have been full of you two—column! I had it in my mind to hunt you up, if I could. Just wanted a look at you. Say, they were out of the shop now—'Come on in to Black's and have a drink. Wine. I made a killing yesterday and I'm wadded to the neck with it. I'll start the party."

"Late. Got to get home to dinner," demurred Charley.

But Mr. Teeters' curiosity was evoked. "Killing, what kind of a killing?" he desired to know.

"Races. Down at Louisville," Mr. Crisp explained. "A chap I met gave me a tip on Pluto. Odds against him three to one—and he ran away from the bunch. Left 'em playing tag with their tails in the stretch. There was nothing to it but count the money. Say, come on in and split a quart with me, just for luck. I cleared up six thousand on that little bay colt and I've got to celebrate."

They went in, and as they cast about for a table Mr. Crisp gave an exclamation of joyful surprise.

"I'm a Dutchman if there ain't old Ben Goggins! Ooo! See what he's doing. He must have hit 'em heavy today."

He pointed to a thickset, red-faced man, with graying hair at the temples, at the end of the room. This person was alone.

A clear was stuck at an acute angle on one side of his mouth, and he was running through with moistened finger a stack of banknotes which, if Mr. Teeters was any judge, stood a foot high on the table before him. Charley viewed the sight with interest.

"Who is Goggins?" he asked of Mr. Crisp.

"Betting commissioner for Delmont. Vanbilt and that crowd of goldbugs. Taps the podium with 'em. But come on over and I'll introduce you. Maybe he'll tell us something."

Mr. Goggins looked up from his task as they approached. He appeared pleased.

"Why hello, Clarence!" he saluted.

"Watering the ponies," replied Mr. Crisp, rolling his swivel eye at his companions. "Hi, Ben! How are you?"

"Don't mind," assented Mr. Goggins. "Sit down. Wait a minute till I finish this."

Mr. Teeters' eyes bulged from his head. The man was counting in "thousands." There were five and ten thousand bills under his hand!

"Confound you, Crisp!" complained Mr. Goggins. "You made me nervous. Ought to be a hundred and twenty-five thousand, and I only make it a hundred and seventy. Well—never mind. I'll go over it again with Delmont. It's his."

He reached under his coat and pulled around to the front a leather bag. He stuffed the notes away in the bag and slipped it back into place. Then he looked at Mr. Crisp who introduced his friends, mentioning proudly their little reputations.

"You don't have to tell me about these boys," spoke Mr. Goggins with gruff heartiness. "Never met 'em before, but Lord, I've heard enough about 'em! The old con game ain't what it used to be before they came to town."

He chuckled and wagged his head at the two sad young dogs across the table. Charley rather liked his bluff way.

Mr. Crisp, who had been busy with the waiter, turned to the commissioner.

"Ben, I drew down six 'M's on Pluto yesterday. Your tip was twenty-four carats fine."

Mr. Goggins shrugged.

"Oh! You're going away?" Mr. Crisp's tone expressed disappointment.

"Don't know anything about horse-racing," said Charley stubbornly.

"Neither do I," Mr. Crisp assured him. "You don't have to. But Ben knows. If he'd tip us off, it's good as money in the bank. Kind of noisy," said Mr. Carter.

"Let him alone, Clarence," reproved Mr. Goggins. "Mebbe he's got scruples against it, and I for one respect a man's scruples, if they ain't no bigger than bumps on the yolk."

He emptied his glass, stretched himself and got up. Mr. Crisp sought to detain him.

"You ain't leaving? I wanted to ask you about the Derby. Sit down, Ben. The bottle's going begging."

Mr. Goggins declined the invitation firmly.

"Why not? Got to see Gus Delmont at 7, and it's 6:30 now. Got to turn this bottle over to him. He's a hundred and fifty thousand to the good on the day's work. Pleased to have met you, gentls. So long."

He nodded pleasantly and walked away. Mr. Teeters finished his second glass, and with it spoke his mind.

"Ain't breaking out with kale so as I got to call a doctor," he avowed. "But I got a hundred I could stand to see something happen to."

Mr. Crisp cast his humorous eye upon him.

"Why not?" he quizzed. "Car faces comes in handy in this town. I'm going to play Ben Goggins' tip tomorrow. If you want me to I'll put you on with him."

Mr. Teeters hesitated. This elegantly attired stranger was, after all, but a stranger, and a hundred dollars was two weeks' salary. He looked askance at Charley, but received no encouragement.

Mr. Crisp merely consulted his watch and went on smoking. Mr. Teeters slowly slipped his hand into his inside vest pocket, and right there his doubts took wing. Mr. Crisp waved him down.

"Never mind the money, old scout. Hold up your finger, that's good enough for me. We'll settle after the race. It's the Ribleben you're staying at, isn't it? That's where they had you in the papers."

"Yes," Mr. Teeters told him, much relieved.

"Good! I'll run in tomorrow evening after dinner. Fill your glass and we'll drink to luck. Won't you join us, Mr. Carter? Just one before you go?"

"No," Charley answered, but with a grin. "Not that stuff. Too expensive. Cost me a hundred thousand dollars once. One bottle."

The Kelpie lay on the foot of West Eighty-fifth street, in the Columbia Yacht Club basin. Only a prince or plutocrat could keep such a craft in commission.

Dorothy and her guests sat around under the awning, drinking their coffee. The party, however, was not complete. Mr. Samuel Drew was the missing member. He had sent Dorothy a telegram at the last moment, and it read rather curiously, to wit:

"Dreadfully sorry. Sudden illness confines me to bed. Bon voyage."

This, we repeat, read rather curiously in view of the fact that the lawyer was seen in apparent robust health by Mr. Teddy Ball—himself unseen—at 12 o'clock that day.

Mr. Ball had called to him, but it did not carry, and he went on. Dorothy's invitation was for 1 o'clock, and he was of no mind to be late. Again, Mr. Drew's message was filed at 11:45, which added to its oddity, for it would seem the gentleman was not stricken until some time after he had sent the telegram conveying the distressing news. Things like these cause comment, and they were reverting to it now on the Kelpie.

"The man's dodging us," asserted Mr. Link.

Mr. Teeters, who had been unaccountably quiet, eyed by his strange surroundings, opened his mouth at this juncture and, as many another man has done, put his foot in it.

"His Com-On he's doing the bo-peep with. Draw's afraid he'll have to come across with the coin Charley's Uncle Billy left him. Two millions!"

"What?" whooped Teddy Ball. "You mean to say, Charley, you haven't got the money yet? Why, the Scram—! all the papers—printed it! How Drew found you—oh mother!"

"Huh!" growled Mr. Link. "So it's that?"

Mr. Teeters, aghast at what he had done, wished his mustache and eyed Charley apprehensively. He was not communicative about his affairs. The world had accepted him as a millionaire de facto, and he had let it go at that. Mr. Teeters, knowing his chief, had also kept a rein on his tongue in this regard.

Now, unthinkingly, he had blurted out the secret. But happily Charley did not resent it, quite the contrary, in fact.

"Good boy, Skeeters," he applauded. "Keep it a whole year. Medal coming to you."

"I don't get the drift of all this," put in Mr. Grant, looking from one to the other of the two young men.

"Long story," Charley explained. "Tell it, Percy. Your job, Secretary."

Thus commanded Mr. Teeters embarked upon the narrative, adorning it as he went with felicitous terms of speech peculiarly his own. When he had finished, Dorothy, whose eyes dwelt on Charley in a way Mr. Ball found himself curious to see, said:

"So from just ten thousand dollars you have made a million in a year?"

"Not yet. Nearly forty thousand shy," Charley corrected her.

"It isn't the money you will make the rest," she waved it aside as a thing accomplished. "It's your cleverness."

"Luck," Charley interrupted. "Come my way. Couldn't help it. And—" he wished to give due credit—"Drew was right. Reputation did it. All thought I had money. Tried to get it. I got their Simple."

"That's all very well," said Mr. Grant. "But how about these two millions? Have you seen your uncle's will?"

"Yes. Didn't read it though. Trouble. Took Mr. Drew's word, he replied. 'Had to make my starter grow.'"

There was an odd look in Charley's hazel eyes. Mr. Drew had noticed it there at times when the late Mr. William Halsted's millions were up for discussion. Mr. Teeters was studying the boy, put a question to him.

"What do you honestly think of it, Charley? The 'starter' business doesn't seem to be a somehow. You don't think Drew—eh?"

Charley regarded him soberly.

"Straight as a string. Good fellow. Got to make my million first. Then—"

"Oh, the Kentucky Derby!" said Mr. Grant. His face lighted up, for he loved a horse.

"The talent is playing Early Boy like the big drum in the band," Mr. Ball observed.

"Yes, he's the favorite," conceded the millionaire sportsman. "Personally I lean to Almo. However—"

Mr. Teeters, who had been smiling at Dorothy—"I wouldn't advise Charley to go forty thousand on him. There are two sides to a race, remember."

Mr. Grant got up and strolled forward. Dorothy also arose. She glanced at Charley—a barely perceptible flash it was—and loitered over to the stern taffrail. He did not tarry a second; he followed her brazenly and they hung upon the rail talking. Mr. Ball winked at Joe Link.

"I should worry about that forty thousand if I was Charley," he chafed.

"Um," grunted the man of muscle, and pulled stolidly at his cigar. Yet his heart was soft for Charley and the girl; for Mr. Link was Irish, and it was the springtime.

"Dad is funny. He has five thousand down on Almo—at his club. I heard him say so. But he doesn't want you to be guided by him. If you should lose—"

Charley nodded.

"Understand. Responsibility. I'd feel that way too. Wish I could get in, just the same."

"Charley! Would you?" Dorothy's eyes sparkled. She was her father's daughter, and there was nothing original in the remark—women are born gamblers.

"Sure I would," said Charley, doubly sure because of Dorothy's delight.

"Again?"

Charley gripped the rail with both hands. He tried to speak. The words he wanted would not come. He tried again, desperately, and choked out:

"Nine hundred thousand. Not much. But housekeeping. Rub along. Make more, Dorothy. I—"

"I don't believe it," jeered Dorothy, gloating over his confusion. "Lots of men have said it to me. Lots! It didn't strangle them either. It came out just as smooth as—"

What you need is practice, Mr. Carter. Some darling girls are going with us. Perhaps—"

She gave him a second look—"You may improve before we get home again."

With this she walked airily away, leaving Charley clinging limply to the rail.

Charley had driven over to the Yacht Club with Mr. Link in his big French car.

"Police station, Billy. West Forty-seventh street," Charley instructed his man.

Mr. Link eyed him curiously.

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

"What was Charley's cryptic reply. They ran down the drive to Seventy-second street and thence down Tenth avenue to Forty-seventh. The lieutenant in charge received them with all the honors, and when they came away he went with them himself in the car.

"Leave it to us, Mr. Carter. You go right ahead," was his parting injunction. "Maybe he won't come," said Charley. "I'd hate to have a bet on that end of it," laughed the officer.

In fact, But he smiled and raised a deprecating hand.

"Let me settle first with this little one from Vinsville."

He drew a fistful of bills from his trousers pocket and shuffled off five one-hundred-dollar notes from it. Mr. Teeters reached forth itching fingers for the money, but Charley interposed a question that delayed the transfer.

"Come out pretty well yourself?"

Mr. Crisp rolled his comedy eye at him and replied:

"Twenty-five thousand—that's all. In the safe at my hotel. I don't take any chances like Ben Goggins. Say, fellows—"

He returned his wad to his pocket and gesticulated with Mr. Teeters' sheaf of bills—"Ben has a card up his sleeve for tomorrow that I'm going to play wide open—my pile! He won't let me till the race is called, but he'll have the dope right from the track. A cinch! The Big Kids, you know."

"Does this go for me too?" queried Mr. Link anxiously.

"Why, as a friend of Mr. Carter—yes, sure," agreed Mr. Crisp. "But it's got to be fair, understand? Just us four. If you talk it around, Ben'll shut up like a clam. We'll just drop around there tomorrow."

"Where?" broke in Mr. Link, who was leaning forward breathlessly.

"I'll take you," said Mr. Crisp guardedly. "It's on Forty-fifth street. Quiet, you know, but they've got the cops fixed. I'll come for you at 2. They start then, but the big thing is in the third. We'll get there in plenty of time for that."

"How about Almo?" asked Charley.

"Almo to win. Thirty thousand four hundred," he stated.

Mr. Teeters wiggled his mustache in furious excitement. The odd four hundred was his. He stood to win two thousand. The ticket writer scratched off a card and shoved it over to Mr. Crisp. Charley hesitated at the wicket.

"Well," snapped Mr. Bitney. "Spit it out. They're others waiting."

"All right," Charley assented the pool-room manager. "Here's fifty thousand, Almo. Want to see it covered, though. Betting running high. May break you."

"See that," cried Mr. Crisp eagerly. "It's a sure thing. Almo! And you pick it him. Charley. Let's go to it while we can. And say, I'm going to play that colt to win. Five to one is the tune. Come on."

Mr. Bitney himself was in the cage when they crossed to it. They were still paying off on the second race. Everybody seemed to have won, or so it looked to Charley. When their chance came Mr. Crisp pushed in a stack of bills.

"Derby. Almo to win. Thirty thousand four hundred," he stated.

They drove east to the Hotel Ribleben. Mr. Teeters had just come in.

"Eat," he greeted Mr. Link. "Going to kill a plate of soup with us."

"Want him to meet Crisp," Charley answered for the boxer. "May do something."

Mr. Teeters uttered a cry.

"Merry Moses! I forgot all about that guy. Maybe—maybe I'm out of a hundred! Let's hurry up and eat while I got an appetite."

But Mr. Teeters was not out his hundred. They were smoking their dinner cigars in Charley's sitting-room when Mr. Crisp was announced.

"Shoot him up!" Mr. Teeters bawled down word to the office over the telephone. Then he hopped about the room in an agony of suspense, until the visitor appeared.

"Did he win?" he squealed. "Say, now, you ain't come to tell me."

"It's all right," Mr. Crisp assured him. "Five to one."

"He's the glad tidings were difficult of belief. 'I made five hundred!'"

"That's what you did," stated the other cheerfully. "Here!" He held out a newspaper turned to the sporting page. "It's all there. Sunshine. Ripped home."

"Five hundred, and I didn't put up a cent!" cackled Mr. Teeters. "Come-On, you stubbed your toe that time. I guess I'm not the little boy from Vinsville, Oh, no, I guess not."

"Gee, I was slow," said Charley ruefully. He introduced Mr. Link. "Mr. Crisp, Mr. Green. Friend. Good sport. Hunting for a tip."

Mr. Crisp who had been doubtfully, if covertly, surveying the ex-champion, extended a cordial hand. Mr. Link took care to clasp it lightly; he did not wish to give the gentleman a too vigorous impression of himself.

Mr. Teeters, who had listened apace to the introduction, suppressed an inopportune comment. Second thought came to his rescue; moreover, he did not like the look Charley directed at him. And, lastly, he forgot about it the next moment in the joy of his winnings.

"Play the ponies now and then, Mr. Green," inquired the tipster pleasantly. "Not lately. Don't know much about the game, but I'm willing," proclaimed Mr. Link. He laughed good-naturedly.

"Think I'll take a shot," Charley said. "Derby. Anything doing?"

This was as Mr. Crisp would have it, what he had planned for and come for.

in the same direction. It was toward Fifty-fifth street, West.

Mr. Ben Goggins waved his hand at Mr. Crisp and his friends and went on talking with a pale, parrot-nosed man over in the corner. Nobody else paid any attention to the look-out, and he led them in secretly at the front door, and another passed them into the pool-room.

It was on the parlor floor, two big apartments opening into each other. Gas flared from the chandeliers, for the windows were closed tight, shades drawn and inside blinds latched over them. Mr. Link grunted as he noted this.

"That's Bitney, Ben's spelling to," Mr. Crisp enlightened them. "Runs the place. We'll wait till Ben gets through. The second race is on."

Charley looked about him. Mr. Teeters twiddled his walking stick and did the same. The sight was new to them. On a blackboard at one side the starters in the second event on the card were chalked up with the odds for an anti-first, second and third place. Opposite this board was the cashier, at a desk with a movable cage half enclosing it.

Further on, in the next room, a telegraph instrument ticked, and the man was calling out the position of the horses as they ran—"In the stretch: White Cloud, Corinne, Jupiter, Belle B. closing up. Field bunching, and so on. A dozen men were feverishly hanging on the telegrapher's announcements."

Mr. Goggins came over to them. He was serious and preoccupied. Mr. Carter introduced Mr. Green.

"What's the lay-out, Ben, for the Derby?" asked Crisp.

"Well," returned Mr. Goggins with deliberation. "I don't want to influence you boys now. The crowd here is a little handling, not my own—but I got word to play Almo straight across the board."

"What?" Mr. Crisp's surprise was overwhelming. He staggered under it.

"By George!" exclaimed Charley, quite as much surprised.

"Saints in heaven!" muttered Mr. Link. "But, Ben," argued Mr. Crisp. "Everybody says Early Boy—"

"Everybody," asserted Mr. Goggins. "What does everybody know about horse racing? You asked me a question and I answered it. Almo straight across the board, and that's that."

Mr. Crisp gasped and rolled his squint eye ludicrously.

"Great guns, Charley! You had it all doped out last night, and here we've been waiting for the word."

"Telegram for Mr. Goggins." The look-out at the door spoke. He thrust the yellow envelope through an inch-wide crack, and Mr. Goggins reached out and took it. They were standing by the entrance. The betting commissioner read the dispatch with evident satisfaction.

"It's from the stable," he announced. "They're bidding Almo to run yet. It's two and even now. Bitney's got it, of course. His wire is straight from the track. Better hop aboard, boys, if you're going to."

He walked off unceremoniously.

"See that," cried Mr. Crisp eagerly. "It's a sure thing. Almo! And you pick it him. Charley. Let's go to it while we can. And say, I'm going to play that colt to win. Five to one is the tune. Come on."

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